Ronan Gasser

Media's part in our partisanship: How media shapes and fosters our political views

In a world increasingly divided along partisan and political lines, misinformation, vitriol, and perceived hostility to individual views have sharply increased across the political spectrum. The culprit for this more divisive and less collaborative political atmosphere is none other than the media we consume, be it through television, social media, or newspaper. As such, Americans across the political spectrum increasingly are committed to their viewpoints and believe that mainstream politics and media are aligned against them. In a media bias study, the phenomenon I have described is known as the Hostile Media Effect is illustrated. "When Israelis and Palestinians viewed American news coverage of the Beirut massacre, both groups agreed that the coverage was biased, but disagreed about the direction of bias: each perceived that the media favored the opposing side (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985)." It has been well documented that trust in mainstream media has declined in the past 10 years, but what sources of information have filled that vacuum, and has it made Americans less willing to engage with opposing viewpoints? In a more divided and cognitively dissonant country than we were twenty years ago, This study will place importance on learning where more Americans are turning to reaffirm their biases, and what mainstream media can do to regain the trust of the American electorate.

The 2016 election was a major force of change and a sort of reckoning for the American electorate. Unlike other elections, one of the defining issues of this election was the media coverage of both Democratic Candidate Hillary Clinton and Republican Candidate Donald Trump. While news stations like CNN, MSNBC, and Fox had always had partisan slants in their

coverage, which carries both upsides and downsides, eventual President-Elect Donald Trump consistently and aggressively criticized the behavior of what he called 'legacy media', and began to use the term "fake news" to describe news stations that didn't cover him in what he felt was a fair or flattering manner. From this point forward, legacy media underwent a steep decline in public image, trust, and eventually usage. A Gallup Poll taken in September 2016 during the campaign season found that "Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" has dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media." While research has been done that proves that media trust has declined substantially, due to both campaign rhetoric and perceived biases in coverage even when they aren't necessarily there (this goes back to the concept of Hostile Media Effect), less has been documented about where exactly those same people who feel disillusioned with mainstream, legacy media have turned their eyes and ears to instead.

The supposed decline of cable news is more nuanced than simply saying that Americans no longer wish to watch or trust news stations on television. The problem that cable news faces in trying to both retain its audience and grow their viewership is also one of a generational divide. According to official statistics from Evoca.TV, 68.7 million households in the United States still subscribe to cable TV, marking a significant 34.57% decline from 105 million subscribers in 2010. While news stations like CNN, Fox, and MSNBC are offered on certain streaming services, the implications are clear. Less people on Cable Television generally means less of an audience to influence politically. This has proven particularly true among the coveted 18-34 age demographic, where the same study has found that just above ten percent of 18-34 year old individuals watch cable television at least once a day. With such a vast majority of this age demographic not consistently engaging with cable television, and thus being significantly less likely to be engaging with television news, it can be reasonably concluded that this age

demographic is either 1.) uninterested in their style of coverage, perhaps favoring something else, 2.) turned off by either legitimate or perceived bias, or 3.) not engaged with world or local events entirely. For the individuals who fall into camps 1 and 2, something, or even someone, inevitably must fill this void of information. A huge percentage of people today, especially Gen Z and younger demographics, are now getting their information from social media, online sources, or even from influencers. With Cable TV's continued decline and platforms like Facebook, Bluesky, and Twitch growing at a staggeringly high rate, these social media networks are set to become the main source of news and political information for people of all ages, but especially those who feel alienated or put off by the shortcomings of mainstream media.

How big of a "problem" this us ultimately comes down to is how you view some of the alternatives arising to fill this information vacuum. The aforementioned social media and platforms, along with X, have for better or worse supplanted Cable News as most people's main source of news, both political and apolitical. According to a Pew Research Study in 2024, 54% of US Adults now "at least sometimes" get their news from Social Media, with Facebook and YouTube leading the charge at 33% and 32% usage respectively. While people getting their information from more independent sources may initially seem like a good thing for society, issues with source reliability and misinformation arise in these less regulated environments. While stations like Fox have seen some inconsistency with political information and have made some misleading claims at times, the ability to deliberately push misinformation and peddling hoaxes on television is greatly limited by FCC regulations, which can punish news stations via financial and commercial means for deliberately broadcasting misinformation including but not limited to: fraud, defamation, false advertising, and election interference.

On the rare occasion that something like this is broadcasted deliberately for the sake of narrative framing, the consequences are often severe. During the 2020 Election, when the aforementioned Fox News and their high profile hosts began claiming that Dominion Voting Machines were rigged in favor of Democratic Nominee Joe Biden over Incumbent President

Donald Trump. The result of these demonstrably false claims was a staggering $778.5 million court settlement for defamation, paid out to Dominion Voting Systems. As such, Cable News is very much pressured to stay within the bounds of believability and relative truth. However, platforms like Facebook and YouTube are not bound to the same restrictions. Major influencers will generally not face legal action or financial punishment for similar false claims about election denial, outlandish conspiracy theories, and harmful medical cynicism. While channels and influencers who consistently engage in misinformation campaigns may see fact checks attached to their claims via Community Notes (first introduced on X), these can easily be waved off as "false flags", or "suppression". With such favorable conditions for misinformation to thrive, especially AI generated deepfakes on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, social media based news and political circles can become breeding grounds for extremism and fringe groups.

The first tenet to the theoretical framework used for this study to attempt to explain the growing number of Americans distrust in mainstream or legacy media is the theory of Cognitive Dissonance. The theory, first introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957, posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when confronted with conflicting beliefs or information. This can explain why certain individuals are inclined to seek out more partisan sources, or media that reinforces their bias without challenging their worldview, while we work to find what media sources they gravitate towards instead. Cognitive Dissonance impacts how an individual views their world and how they perceive events, both political and apolitical. If one is unwilling to interact with conflicting viewpoints, they will inevitably find themselves in an echo chamber. One such example tied to studies done on cancer information found that the combination of confusion and pressure to conform can lead to information avoidance and eventually, avoidance of the topics and prevailing narrative altogether. **(Zhou, T., & Xie, Y.)(2023).**

With this framing in mind, we can get an idea of what has turned people off from mainstream media sources and has pushed them towards more partisan alternatives. Cognitive Dissonance is tied to our deeply held beliefs that we don't want to challenge. A major example would be

religion, where those who are religious and affiliated with a faith don't wish to alter or weaken their belief in their religion. Another such example in the political sphere of the Cognitive Dissonance phenomena was seen by the conduct and behavior of political researcher and professor Allan Lichtman during the events of the 2024 Presidential Election. Mr. Lichtman is known for his "Keys To The White House" prediction model, which had accurately forecasted the winner of ten of the past eleven Presidential Elections. His model has predicted that incumbent President Joe Biden would win reelection as far back as 2022, but despite mounting evidence from polls and pundits alike that Mr. Biden was on pace to a large scale loss in 2024, he insisted the pollsters must be wrong, not his model or methodology.

Despite the puzzling nature of this behavior in the face of mounting evidence, it isn't uncommon at all in politics. One such study found that voters who supported the losing candidate exhibited greater changes in their evaluations of the candidates compared to those who supported the winning candidate. **(Beasley, R. K., & Joslyn, M. R.)(2001)**. They found that voters (and media alike) ascribe more flaws in the national environment and shortcomings to the losing candidate if they supported said candidate than those who supported the winning candidate tend to do. If this sounds familiar, it should. Mainstream media who exhibited a lean towards Democratic policies or candidates in 2024, following Democratic Nominee Kamala Harris' loss to Republican Nominee Donald Trump, began a sort of revisionist campaign detailing why Kamala Harris' loss should have been seen as 'obvious' or 'inevitable', despite the very close polling suggesting the election could break either way. As quickly as Harris was built up and praised for her positions and qualification for higher office, she was torn down. Many accused her of being unwilling to break with Biden sufficiently, blasted her media strategy, criticized her stances on the border and the war in Gaza, and even claimed she was always going to be 'unelectable' due to the national environment being so conservative. While there may be varying degrees of truth in these statements, where were these dismissive claims being stated before the election? While voters may choose to believe that their preferred candidate or

party is unbeatable, the media is often just as guilty of this, giving more airtime to polls or studies with flawed methodology if they provide good news for their preferred candidate. Pollsters of networks with ideological tilts often find themselves under pressure, be it direct or indirect, to find positive news for candidates that align with the network's reporting. **(Ryan L. Claassen**, **John Barry Ryan) (2024).**

At its core, Cognitive Dissonance is a social construct. People do not enjoy feeling that they are wrong or even in the minority, and will subconsciously either ignore indications that they are, or attempt to rectify these differences. In a study done involving a faux hypothetical election in 2024, participants took a blind survey of their preference on common political issues, such as corporate tax rates, immigration, and economics, and were asked to select a candidate who aligns with their policy ideals. When the control group was shown the results of these polls, and the standing of the candidates were revealed based on the results of their choices, the participants saw their policy preferences shift towards figures leading in the polls. "In comparison to a neutral control treatment in which no support was raised, participants supporting a candidate in the hypothetical election changed their policy preferences to be more aligned with those of the supported candidate." **(Tanja Artiga Gonzalez , Capozza B. , Georg D. Granic) (2024)**. The reason that people adjusted their beliefs and policy preferences in order to conform more with the popular candidate rather than their true, unadjusted preferences isn't because they had a sudden change of heart, but rather is rooted in discomfort in being the minority and not being in cohorts with the consensus opinion.

The second major tenet to the theoretical framework used within this study is the concept of Political Polarization.This concept refers to the growing divide in political attitudes and ideologies, often resulting in individuals or groups shifting toward the extremes of the political spectrum. This division can lead to increased partisanship, reduced willingness to compromise, and a more fragmented and contentious political climate. The United States as a whole is more politically polarized than it was fifty, or even twenty years ago, but the 2016 election was a

defining result of years of political polarization. One specific issue where polarization can be seen across the American electorate is in regards to views on immigration. One such study found that while Democrats and most Independents have leaned towards keeping or increasing the current immigration rates to America, Republicans have stayed mostly opposed, preferring decreases, painting a stark division between the parties. "In the intervening years, what was a gap grew into a chasm. Among Republicans, the percentage saying immigration should be reduced decreased from 76 percent in 1994 to 62 percent in 2000, a significant fourteen-point drop in just six years; it has not changed significantly since then, though, still standing at 62 percent in 2018." **(Hout, M., & Maggio, C.)(2021)**

Although political polarization goes beyond surface level issues such as immigration, economics, and other 'dinner table issues', it is also a symptom of a larger problem, that being the increasingly partisan nature of our politics and media. News stations such as Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC have used harsher and more dehumanizing language in regards to the 'other' party, with terms such as "woke", "draconic", "radical", and "elitist" becoming mainstays on channels where Americans often get their information from. A study conducted in 2023 showed that the use of words such as racist", "racism", "police", "black lives matter", "immigrant", "immigration", "climate change","global warming", and "health care" had become increasingly semantically divergent in between 2010 and 2020, "with semantic polarity between the two stations starts to sharply increase every year on average by 112% across all keywords starting in 2016." **(Xiaohan Ding,1 Mike Horning, 2 Eugenia H. Rho 1.)(2023)**.

In simpler terms, this means the aforementioned words are being used and wielded in intentionally different ways, both positively and negatively, in order to better shape their respective political agenda. Since 2000, there has been a growing divide in terms of political attentiveness and education in political beliefs and views of policy. One such study illustrates this concept through polling support of Bush's proposed privatization of Social Security, which both highlights the information divide in shaping America's political views, but also begs the

question of whether or not this is due to partisan sourcing. "Attentive Democrats were the most opposed, with attentive independents also more likely to oppose. Majorities of moderates, liberals, and all respondents who paid closer attention to the news disapproved of Bush and opposed privatization, whereas opposition stood at less than half of respondents for those in these two groups who reported paying no attention to the News." **(DiMaggio, A. R.)(2017).**

   The rise of populism has also contributed to the more polarized, divided electorate we've seen in recent years. By definition, populism is a political philosophy in which a candidate or movement champions the common man or worker against a supposed 'elite', power holding group, or perceived aggressor to their livelihood. Figures such as Donald Trump and other MAGA aligned politicians such as Josh Hawley, Ted Cruz, and JD Vance posit that there is a sort of bureaucratically aligned threat to the United States and the common man, be it The Deep State, Big Tech, Immigrants, or something else, the common theme is that the other side, in this case Democratically aligned candidates and party members, are colluding with these forces to maintain their power, and must be defeated.

   Such rhetoric is often controversial and divisive across political orientations. Many claim that while in the minority, a populist movement is often left relatively unchecked and unchallenged, "but populists that command large numbers of votes pose a significant threat that activates group identities and creates an increasingly strong affective response." **(Davis, B., Goodliffe, J., & Hawkins, K.) (2024)**. The concept that harsher rhetoric and treatment towards important institutions and pillars of American Liberal Democracy, such as election integrity / certification, immigration, and Constitutional rights such as due process, is met with a proportionally strong response and countercultural movement appears to be accurate. Trump's first term, which was marked by its populist stances against immigration and LGBTQ rights, Republicans suffered big losses in the House of Representatives during the 2018 midterms, and Donald Trump went on to lose the 2020 Presidential Election by over seven million votes. Whether or not populism is or is not an effective, long term strategy or philosophy in American politics is up for debate, but

the larger question at hand is how has the media approached this more populist era of American politics, and are they muzzling or amplifying Populist figures and or policies?

As it turns out, it's a bit more black and white than the media covering populist figures or populism as a whole favorably or unfavorably. Networks with centrist or left wing slants, such as CNN, NPR, and MSNBC have been noted as less favorable and critical to populist candidates, even those who are closer aligned to their political platforms, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, and populist candidates of varying ideological backgrounds are accused of divisive practices and demagoguery. Meanwhile, right wing news stations, especially Fox, are more favorable to populist figures and ideals, and are willing to platform and champion their campaigns and ideas if they are in ideological alignment. Oftentimes, right wing populism revolves around 'outgroups' that are perceived to threaten societal harmony", such as criminals or immigrants, and right wing news provides an amplifier for these narratives, creating a polarized environment and culture of fear around these topics between these different stations. **Bobba, G., Mancosu, M., Nai, A., Seddone, A., & Vegetti, F. (2024).** The truth on topics such as immigration, drug policies, the economy and other hot issues of today likely reside somewhere in between the Anti-Populist, more establishment friendly coverage of center-left news stations and the full blown Pro-Populist, hard right wing narratives of right wing news stations. It's ok to be upset about aspects of capitalism in our country, and having concerns about our border or crime rates is normal and understandable, but the solution is unlikely to be found in gutting the government and taking hardline divisive policies. Nor will the solution to Americans' dissatisfaction of America's flaws be found in dismissing their problems and labeling those voicing these concerns as demagogues. Yet the media is so starkly polarized for and against populism, and the electorate and viewer bases of these stations grow increasingly entrenched in favor or against this style of politics.

The end result of this 'us against them' style of reporting is a populace and electorate significantly more divided amongst itself than in previous decades. Bipartisan attitudes and the

willingness to negotiate with those of opposing political orientations have both declined sharply. A Research Report conducted by Pew News found that Democrats and Republicans are more likely to ascribe negative terms, (those specifically being: Close Minded, Dishonest, Immoral, Unintelligent, and Lazy), to people who are members of the opposing political party than they were just six years ago. Also notably, this same research report shows that over 50% of Republicans prefer party leaders who claim that Donald Trump won the 2020 Presidential Election. **(Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley, Nida Asheer, Talia Price) (2022)**. These findings reflect that, though it took some time, a polarized media environment, particularly via Cable TV, has resulted in the electorate itself becoming negatively polarized against other groups as well. Populism may not be the reason for such a polarized electorate, but the coverage surrounding it was a large piece of the puzzle. Echo Chambers form both on television and online to defend or attack populist movements in America, particularly the MAGA aligned branch, which is the most powerful of these movements. As Americans find themselves on one side or the other of this debate, they discredit the counter perspective as disingenuous, dishonest, or even immoral, and eventually begin to ascribe those labels to people themselves who disagree with their political standing. The byproduct of a more hostile media environment and one where people are less willing to find common ground is that of a more segregated, echo chamber media environment where people of stronger political beliefs flock towards sources that tell them what they want to hear.

My main theory or hypothesis that I seek to test through two rounds of extensive surveying is my twofold belief that **As Political Partisanship rises, trust in more mainstream media sources like TV news declines, and so too does an inability or unwillingness to engage with opposing perspectives.** Ultimately, it feels that partisans on both sides of the political spectrum more so favor media sources that favor and reinforce the beliefs they already have rather than media sources that challenge and question those beliefs. Despite Cable TV's growing partisan habits of their own, they aren't fully able to keep up with the hyperpartisan

demands of a restless electorate for practical (and sometimes legal) reasons. The growth of less regulated and fact checked platforms platforms like X and Facebook are better equipped to satisfy both partisans and more fringe demographics with less restrictions on controversial topics like conspiracy theories, misinformation, and sometimes violent content. Though we already know that Cable TV's viewership is down, especially among young people, due to our prior research, we need to establish an initial baseline of where media habits, trust, and political orientation lie within my age demographic. The preliminary round, unlike the secondary round, will not be separated by political affiliation, so we can see how a group of all political backgrounds feel about the media, how they find their news, and how diligent they are about researching news about politics and world events. As such, the questions we will be asking in the preliminary round of surveying will be as follows:

- How old are you?
- How often do you seek out or read about news or politics?
- Of these News outlets, which one would you be most likely to watch?
- When looking for news, what source of media do you tend to use the most?
- Do you tend to trust "mainstream media", such as NBC, Fox, CNN, etc?
- Finally, what would you describe your political orientation as?

Other notable studies about trust in media and the correlation it has to political polarization and sometimes, extremism, have measured similar metrics in topics like age and media habits, such as Pew News' study on the same topic, but tended to do it through preselected answers rather than asking more open ended questions, especially regarding what alternative media sources people who have become disillusioned by mainstream media prefer. While I am still using preselected, static answers for the questions within the preliminary survey, I will be using more open ended questions in the secondary, politically segregated surveys. I am measuring the

variables and constructs from both the preliminary and secondary surveys via percentage points collected from the poll, though the open ended questions will have more written answers, so those ones may be compiled into groups and sorted via answer similarity. While this differs from other professional surveys in the same vein as this one, I feel it is especially important when regarding something as human as trust and political polarization. Many people feel disillusioned and betrayed by legacy media, so I think it's important to learn more specifically why they feel that way, and what alternative sources they are using to fill that information void. In the final tabulation of our data, we will analyze the numbers via percentage points of the closed response answers, but also look at some of the written response questions to find any significant trends, findings, or revelations that either proves or disproves my hypothesis. While the bulk of this research design will be through analyzing numbers and looking at percentages and numerical values reflecting feelings towards the media and other topics, garnering individual comments will be important to ensure the validity and unique perspectives of the participants.

As mentioned earlier, the research on this topic will primarily be done via survey, specifically on Google Forms. While the preliminary survey was conducted entirely on Google Forms via respondents from my Snapchat story, for the secondary, politically segregated round of surveying, I had to look beyond the internet and Snapchat respondents (though I did include certain members of the preliminary survey who fit the criteria) to find people of either Republican or Democratic political affiliation who expressed some level of distrust in the media. In these survey, our primary metric of questioning will revolve around respondents of both party affiliations rating their level of partisanship, feelings towards Donald Trump's Presidency, sense of media fairness surrounding coverage of Trump's administration, and media fairness towards their political beliefs by mainstream media, all upon a numerical scale. For all respondents in the second round of surveying, the questions asked were as followed:

- On a scale from 1 to 10, how Liberal / Conservative do you see yourself as?

- On a scale from 0 (worst) to 10 (best), how would you rate Donald Trump's performance as President thus far?

- On a scale from 0 (most unfair) to 10 (most fair possible), how fair do you think that the mainstream media has been towards covering in assessing Donald Trump's presidency?

- On a scale from 0 (most unfair) to 10 (most fair possible), how fair do you feel mainstream media is towards covering and assessing your political beliefs?

- How old are you?

- When looking for news, what source of media do you tend to use the most?

- Would you describe yourself as "willing to engage or listen to" opposing media perspectives?

- What alternative sources do you prefer or favor, if any, over mainstream media for political news or commentary? (OPEN ENDED)

- Finally, what is your largest gripe or complaint with mainstream media's coverage? (OPEN ENDED)

While most of these could have been done via online survey, I favored getting most of my respondents for the secondary round of survey by interviewing people who best fit the categories of being a Democrat or Republican with issues with mainstream media. To my surprise, it was fairly easy to find people who fit these categories, and between the Buffalo State College Campus, my place of work, locals in my town, and the inclusion of certain preliminary survey participants who fit the category, I was able to garner a sufficient numbers of respondents quite quickly, a development that seems to favor my initial hypothesis.

In deciding the right number of people to sample for each round of surveying, I eventually landed on fifty people for the preliminary, non-Politically segregated round, and forty Democrats and Republicans each for the secondary, Politically segregated
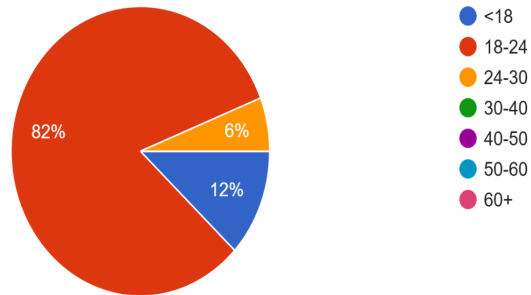
round. I think this is the best realistic number for this project as it allows us to get a good sized sample of ideologically diverse individuals' feelings on media and their habits, which will allow us to get a good picture of how Gen Z, (predominantly 18-24 year old respondents) view the state of their media. It also grants us the differing perspectives of more partisan, ideologically similar individuals, and their more open ended, individual concerns with mainstream media, and their specific preferences to get their news from. I feel more personalized sampling via interviews and questioning (though I still filled out the survey for them via asking the question) works best for the more ideological participants because it allows me to garner quotes and hear more in-depth explanations regarding their preference for grassroots media or avoidance of cognitively dissonant media that makes them question their own beliefs. With more direct words, we will be able to better analyze similarities and differences between partisans of both sides, and find patterns in their media habits and belief systems. All respondents' answers, except for the open-ended questions in the secondary round of surveying, will be displayed on visual pi graphs with labels for each selected answer. Respondents were not forced to answer the open ended questions, especially if they were unable to, but it was encouraged.

Results:

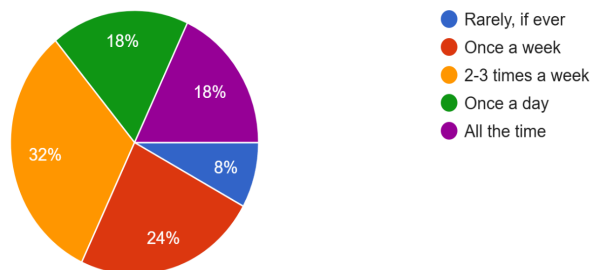(Had difficulty with formatting data, scroll down for analysis of preliminary results*)
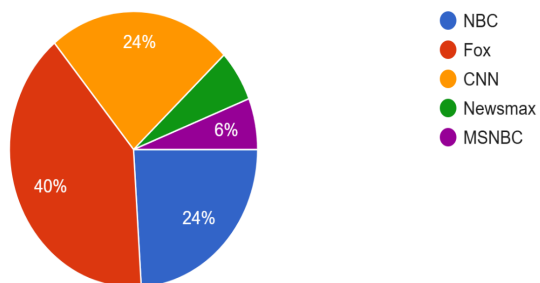
How old are you?
50 responses

- <18
- 18-24
- 24-30
- 30-40
- 40-50
- 50-60
- 60+

82%
6%
12%

About how often do you seek out or read about news or politics?
50 responses

- Rarely, if ever
- Once a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Once a day
- All the time

18%
18%
8%
32%
24%

Of these News outlets, which one would you be most likely to watch?
50 responses

- NBC
- Fox
- CNN
- Newsmax
- MSNBC

24%
6%
40%
24%

When looking for news, what source of media do you tend to use the most?

50 responses

- ● Television
- ● Social Media
- ● Radio
- ● News Tab
- ● Newspaper

92%

6%

Do you tend to trust "mainstream media", such as NBC, Fox, CNN, etc?

50 responses

- ● Of course!!
- ● For the most part
- ● Kind of, but I have my issues with it
- ● Not really...
- ● Hell no!

30%

16%

34%

18%

Finally, what would you describe your political orientation as?

50 responses

- ● Far Left
- ● Left
- ● Center Left
- ● Centrist
- ● Center Right
- ● Right
- ● Far Right

20%

16%

24%

14%

18%

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding of this round of surveying is the dominance of Social

Media in news sourcing amongst this largely 18-24 year old demographic. While we had already

known that Cable TV was in decline nationwide, particularly amongst younger individuals, Social

Media representing a staggering 92% of the preferred media sourcing remains quite the shock, with only three participants preferring television news and only one participant preferring newspaper. Of this group, I also found that these respondents are moderately to fairly well engaged with the media and news, with 68% of respondents seeking out or reading news / politics at least 2-3 times within a week. A moderate preference for Fox News, of the options presented, was illustrated by 40% of participants selecting the station as their preferred television news station, with CNN and NBC trailing at 24% each. This is particularly interesting given Fox's populist slant and factually questionable material, perhaps signifying a preference for more favorable coverage of right wing figures. In regards to media trust, the participants have showcased they have significant reservations about putting their faith in mainstream media sources, with 80% of the participants showcasing some level of issues with mainstream media, and 46% saying they either don't really trust it or not at all. Given the diverse political ideologies surveyed, with centrists being the most common affiliation at just 24%, so far it initially appears that distrust in mainstream media and television news is not necessarily limited to those with stronger held political beliefs.
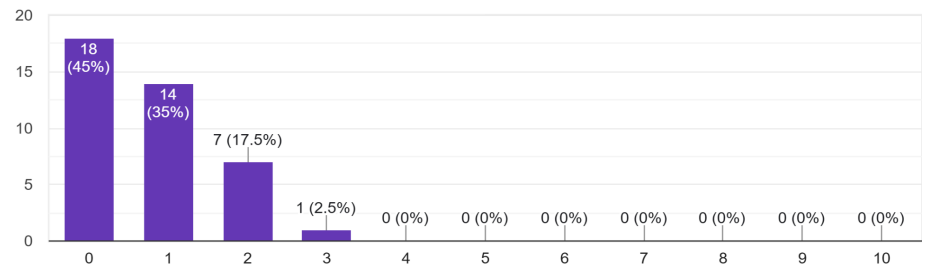
With my hypothesis on shaky grounds, I will now reach out to Democrats and Republicans alike who have expressed at least "some level of concern" with mainstream media and television news. Their answers reflected that of a polarized political and media environment, but did reflect some level of nuance within their answers.
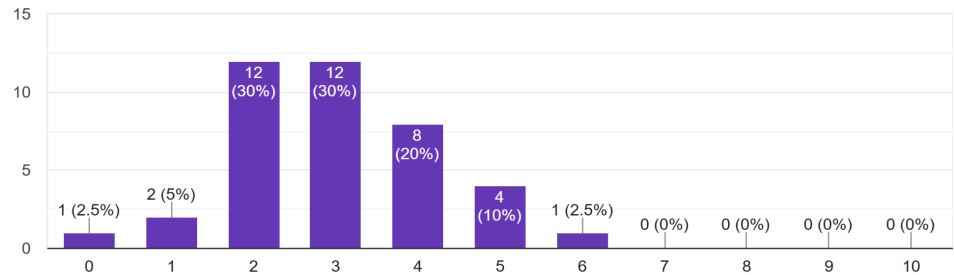
Democrat Results

On a scale from 1 (Not Liberal at All) - 10 (Extremely Liberal), how Liberal do you see yourself as?

40 responses

On a scale from 0 (worst) to 10 (best), how would you rate Donald Trump's performance as President thus far?
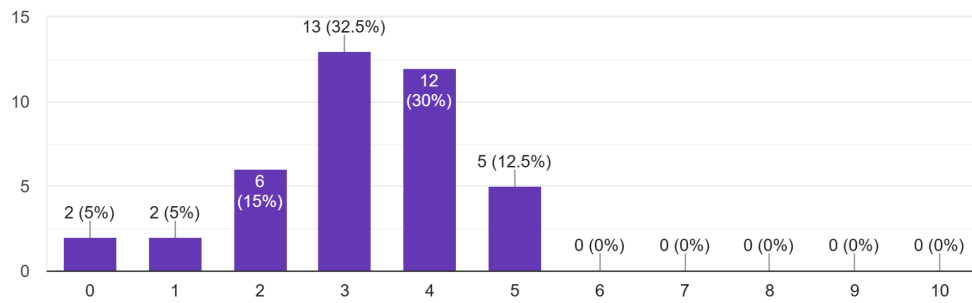
40 responses

On a scale from 0 (extremely inaccurate) to 10 (extremely accurate), how accurately do you think that the mainstream media has performed in regar...ge and assessment of Donald Trump's presidency?
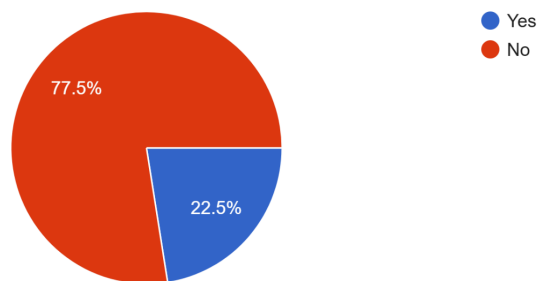
40 responses

On a scale from 0 (most unfair) to 10 (most fair possible), how fair do you feel mainstream media is towards covering and assessing your political beliefs?
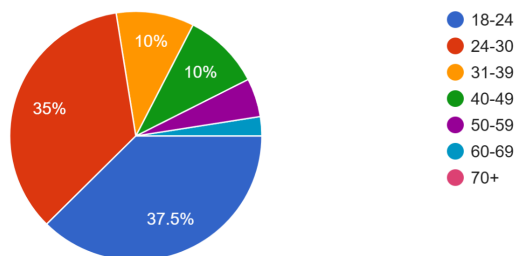
40 responses

Would you describe yourself as "willing to engage or listen to" anti-Liberal media perspectives?
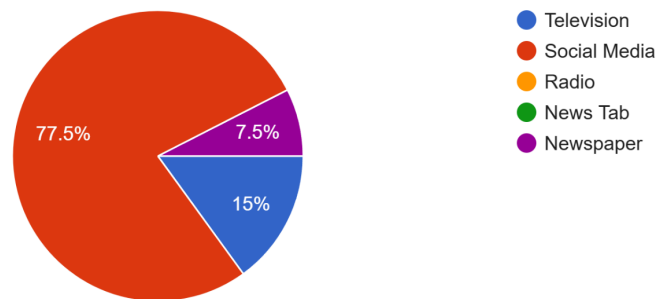
40 responses

- Yes
- No

How old are you?

40 responses

- 18-24
- 24-30
- 31-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70+

When looking for news, what source of media do you tend to use the most?
40 responses

- Television
- Social Media
- Radio
- News Tab
- Newspaper

77.5% 7.5% 15%

Unsurprisingly, most Democrats are solidly liberal, and staunchly opposed to Trump's presidency, the vast majority ranking his presidency in between zero (worst possible) and two. The Democrats I polled are more divided on how the media has covered Trump's presidency, with the majority giving them poor job ratings between two and three, but a notable minority giving them more neutral ratings between four and five. Views on media coverage and fairness in regards to their own political views find themselves in a similar spot, with most respondents giving them between a three and four. When asked if one would be willing to listen to anti-liberal, more conservative minded media, many of the in-person respondents gave an emphatic "No!", though a notable minority, (generally older respondents) expressed some level of openness. As expected, the media source diet remains largely through social media, though not by as large of a margin as the preliminary survey, and as one of the open ended questions, I asked the respondents whom they preferred to listen to for liberal political news or commentary if they weren't willing to engage with mainstream sources:

- HasanAbi; Twitch Streamer: 8 Respondents
- Ezra Klein; Twitch Streamer / YouTuber: 6 Respondents

- Destiny; YouTuber, TikTok Content Creator: 4 Respondents

- Don Lemon; Journalist, YouTuber: 4 Respondents

- Sam Seder, YouTuber: 2 Respondents

- Vausch; YouTuber: 1 Respondent

- Dean Withers; TikTok Influencer: 1 Respondent

- No one / Declined to Respond: 14 Respondents

When asked what their single biggest gripe about mainstream media and TV news was, the most common answer I heard was the lopsided coverage in favor of Israel during reporting about the Gaza War. (paraphrased for brevity*)
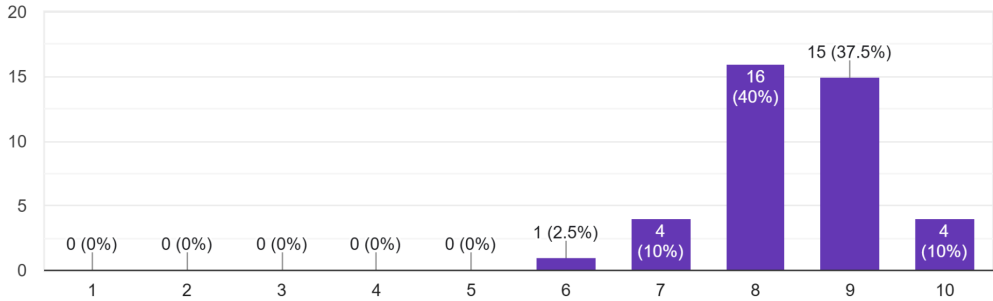
"I've yet to see fair or, even really like, balanced coverage of what's going on in Gaza and Israel on TV networks. A lot of Palestinians are dying, many children, but most of those stations aren't willing to show the suffering that's going on there and take Israel's side. It's a both party thing and neither side wants to tell the truth."

Another common complaint was a perceived bias against Progressives in the party, and stations' refusal to give them airtime or credit them as serious candidates.
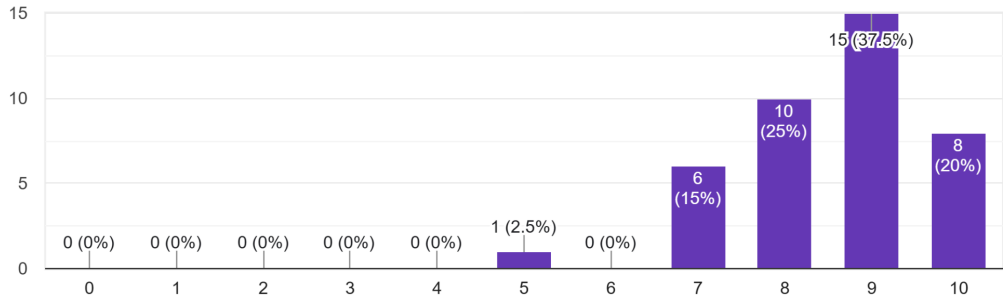
"I was put off by CNN when.. I think it was 2016, didn't treat Sanders like a real candidate, or if they did talk about him, it was all negative, even though he was getting a lot of attention and people liked his ideas. It's not right to only broadcast what you think."
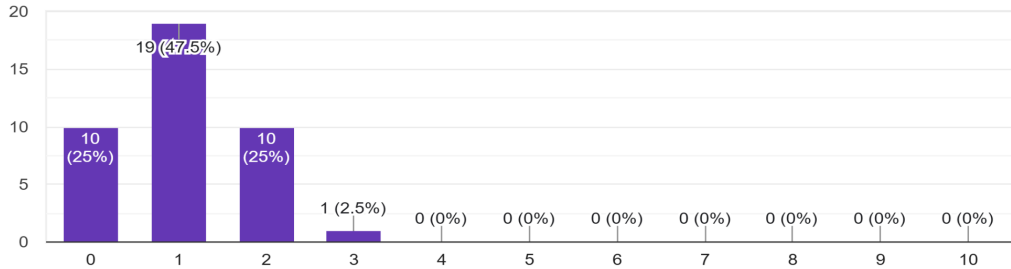
Republican Results:

On a scale from 1 (Not Conservative at All) - 10 (Extremely Conservative), how Conservative do you see yourself as?

40 responses

On a scale from 0 (worst) to 10 (best), how would you rate Donald Trump's performance as President thus far?
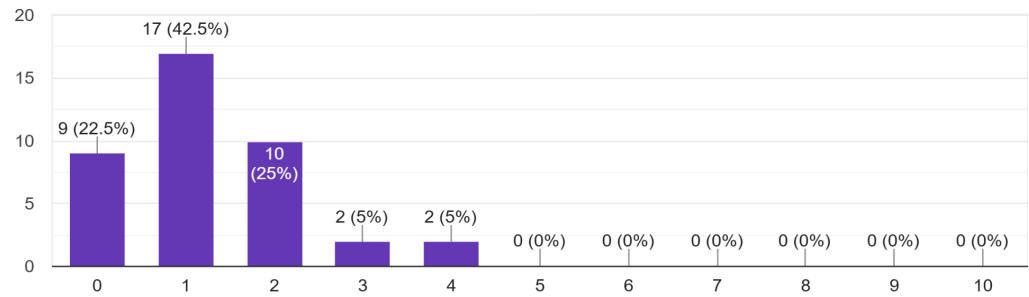
40 responses

On a scale from 0 (extremely inaccurate) to 10 (extremely accurate), how accurately do you think that the mainstream media has performed in regar...ge and assessment of Donald Trump's presidency?
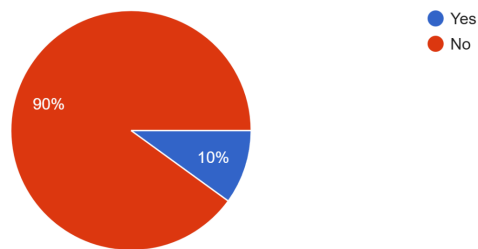
40 responses

On a scale from 0 (most unfair) to 10 (most fair possible), how fair do you feel mainstream media is towards covering and assessing your political beliefs?
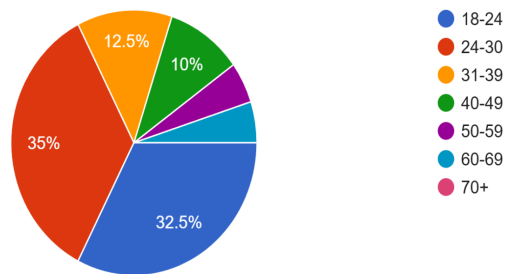
40 responses

Would you describe yourself as "willing to engage or listen to" anti-Conservative media perspectives?
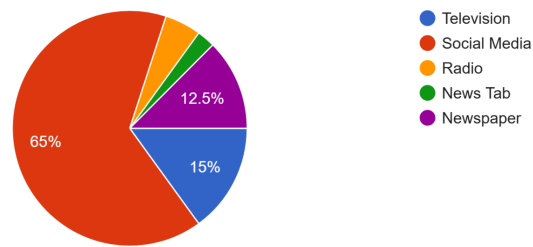
40 responses

How old are you?

40 responses

When looking for news, what source of media do you tend to use the most?
40 responses

Legend:
- Television
- Social Media
- Radio
- News Tab
- Newspaper

(Pie chart values: 65%, 15%, 12.5%)

The Republicans that I talked to, were on average, very conservative. They exhibited a stronger partisan lean than the Democrats I spoke to, with the vast majority falling between eight and nine. As such, they were very enthusiastic with me when discussing Trump's presidency, many using words such as 'hope' and 'leadership' whilst describing it. The results reflected this, with the large majority of Republicans giving his administration high marks. Unlike the Democratic respondents, Republicans were extremely unified in their views of mainstream media in regard to their coverage of the Trump administration, with every participant saying they were not accurate in their coverage whatsoever. They felt similarly about how the media assesses and covers their political beliefs, with almost every respondent falling between zero and two. When asked whether they would be willing to engage or listen with Anti-Conservative, more liberal media perspectives, the question was often met with a sneer or disgust, as these Republicans were even less likely to engage with a counter point of view than the Democrats I surveyed. With this specific group of people, it wasn't as easy to find college students for this activity, as Buffalo State (and most four year Universities) have a strong liberal lean. As such, I ended up interviewing a larger array of people, and the demographics reflect that, with a lower share of 18-24 year olds than in the Democratic Survey. These individuals also had a broader array of media consumption habits, with social media being the dominant source, but by a smaller majority as Newspaper, Television, Radio, and News Apps comprised smaller parts of their

media diets. Just like in the Democratic Survey, I asked the respondents whom they preferred to listen to for conservative political news or commentary if they weren't willing to engage with mainstream sources:

- Tucker Carlson; podcaster, former Fox News anchor: 12 Respondents
- Joe Rogan; podcaster, comedian: 8 Respondents
- Ben Shapiro; commentator, writer: 4 Respondents
- Matt Walsh; commentator, film director: 2 Respondents
- Charlie Kirk; media personality, activist: 2 Respondents
- Dan Bongino; podcaster: 1 Respondent
- Bill O'Reilly; podcaster, former Fox News anchor: 1 Respondent
- No one / Declined to comment: 10 Respondents

When asked what their single biggest gripe about mainstream media and TV news was, a common answer I heard was the perceived hatred and biases against Trump, his supporters, and the MAGA movement. (paraphrased for brevity*)

"Just about nowhere on television can you find positive news about Trump's presidency. Even Fox and Newsmax, which are supposed to be Pro Trump, aren't doing it accurately. All this fake news on TV about Trump, against his voters, it's tiring and sad. He won the popular vote and we voted for this, so why isn't that how they report??"

Another participant lamented his belief that mainstream news is more focused on foreign conflicts and 'nothingburger' issues while ignoring the crisis at the border.

"When I watch television and go onto the news, it's always something about Ukraine. Something about Israel. Something about Taiwan. Frankly we're all sick of it and want the camera to be

pointed at our own problems at the border and our national debt. American media should be

focused on covering American issues."

With my surveying and analysis complete, I believe I can with confidence **sustain my original hypothesis**. While the first rounds of surveying did show a higher level of distrust within the media than I would have initially expected, given it was not limited to specific ideology, both Democrats and Republicans showed a consistently higher distrust of the mainstream media than the first study. Additionally, both Democrats and Republicans harbored major problems with how the media covers Donald Trump and his Presidency, showcasing a rare common ground and a sort of proponent of the Horseshoe Theory due to intense political polarization. The more diverse age demographics in both the Democratic and Republican surveys may have impacted overall results, but the main takeaways were that they both used less social media as their primary source of news than the initial group, but both groups had specific influencers and secondary media sources that they listened to, largely to reinforce their own beliefs rather than challenge it.

   As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the media we consume is the culprit for our increasing political and personal divisions. However, it seems that mainstream media may be less to blame than I had initially anticipated. While it's true mainstream media has become more partisan in the face of populism's rise in the United States, it is also true that less and less people ultimately trust TV based news and other mainstream sources. Stations like Fox News may fare better in the long term due to their embrace of populist sentiments, but the message I received was clear. Mainstream media is less popular than ever and influencers are now the ones who reign supreme in this new age of information. Americans seem to believe that coverage that goes against what they believe, particularly within partisan lines, is an attack on themselves and look for more partisan, sometimes extremist, echo chambers elsewhere. The most popular alternative media source for Democrats that I polled, HasanAbi, while a talented

streamer and popular amongst the younger demographics I spoke to, also has faced allegations of antisemitism and made comments about Israelis and the IDF that many have found insensitive at best and offensive at worst. Tucker Carlson, the most popular alternative media source for Republicans that I polled, also has allegations of extremist rhetoric, with him being a vocal advocate of the Great Replacement Theory, a main catalyst in motivating the Buffalo Tops Shooter to carry out his depraved massacre. Extremists exist on both sides, but mainstream media must address and take the concerns echoed by both sides I surveyed seriously in order to stem the momentum of these insensitive and potentially dangerous figures.

  Despite the successful study, issues arose in finding Republicans to participate in the survey, especially on campus, where I only found a handful of young conservatives, due to the more liberal lean of colleges. As such, I had to look in more suburban areas, at my place of work, and other unorthodox places until I reached the forty person threshold. I also encountered individuals who became uncomfortable when asked about their views on Trump, and refused to continue with the survey. It's hard to say if this was due to paranoia, Trump's divisive nature, or some other reason, but it slowed my progress at times. Some may critique the fact that I asked the initial group and the partisan groups different questions, but this was by design. The initial survey was more to gauge the overall feel on mainstream media from people of all political stripes, whilst asking different questions (such as about Trump) to the more partisan groups were best to gauge how they felt about mainstream media.

  Overall, the research and data collected reflects an increasingly divided nation that can no longer trust their own media like they used to. While the data I collected may seem discouraging, mainstream media sources should use it as a source of motivation. The problems people have with media can largely be rectified, and while TV is no longer the source of information it once was, networks like CNN, Fox, NBC, and others can expand their digital footprint by doing more streaming on platforms like Twitch and Instagram. The era of misinformation we live in is largely a byproduct of specific issues people have with the media,

and with adjustments to how they report on issues like foreign conflicts, more balanced reporting in regards to both parties, and embracing populism (when it is appropriate to do so), mainstream media could very well regain the trust and viewership of a country desperate for reliable news, and finally break the echo chamber cycle that we have been stuck in.

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